

## Preface

Throughout my life, I held a secret. Behind my pretty smile and personable demeanor, I carried a longing. I hungered to feel important to someone. Not just anyone, I wanted to be desired by a man, a person to love me and make me feel whole. And I was willing to give up a lot to fulfill that yearning. Unfortunately, too often, I did.

Childhood fairytales spoke of Prince Charming, and I hoped that one day I'd meet mine. With each man that showed interest, I prayed this was him, the white knight and perfect partner who would rescue me from my fears and insecurities by carrying me off into a world of happily-ever-after. I knew with my prince, I'd finally feel loved, and all would be well. But that never happened. Instead, I typically landed in one unhealthy relationship after another, spending months, sometimes years, looking for love from those seemingly incapable of giving it.

Very early in a relationship, wanting to see my partner as the right one for me, I tended to gloss over red flags and proceed forward anyway. Then, once a couple, my pleaser behavior kicked in. In my attempt to avoid the possibility of disappointing him, I participated in activities that didn't interest me, turned down time with friends and tolerated his difficult emotions, all in the name of keeping him happy.

I will also say that I made the man in my life a priority, choosing time with him over others, hurting those closest to me. And when alone, thoughts, fantasies and dreams about this man filled my head. Even when conversing with friends, I talked about little else other than my current relationship. I was never without him.

My overwhelming sense of insecurity sent me into years of therapy, where I thoroughly explored my upbringing. I was an only child with an abandoning father and a distant and sometimes angry mother—a woman who feared men. Having closed herself off to relationships long ago, my mother displayed little to no understanding of my desire for one. But to me, sharing life with a partner seemed like a welcome solution to everything. I just didn't know why.

My biggest struggle was this. I could get into a relationship. That was easy, often falling too quickly for a man. But because my self-esteem and identity as a woman depended upon that relationship, walking away felt nearly impossible. Even when things became troublesome, I stayed. And when I could muster up the courage to leave, the pain often felt too much to bear, causing me to return. Over the years, this vicious cycle played itself out again and again. Then I woke up.

In 2015, I hit bottom. After a man I'd met online charmed me, quickly proposed, then promptly moved in, my life turned upside-down, becoming a roller coaster ride of emotionally manipulative games. Yet, despite knowing things weren't working, I found myself paralyzed by the idea of letting go. Angry, confused, unhappy and in pain, I knew that something needed to change—and that something needed to be *me*.

The time finally arrived to turn my energy away from a man and toward my efforts at healing. To do so, I set aside a long weekend alone to explore the depths of my dysfunction, its patterns, beliefs, and behaviors. I decided to write. I hoped that putting the events of my life into chronological order might reveal answers around this unending need to be loved at all costs. So, with my phone turned off and healthy snacks at hand, I purged out the years through the keys of my laptop. As the pages filled up with incidents from childhood and on through my romantic life, the answers began to appear. The result is this book.

Several years have passed since that weekend. As a clinical therapist, I needed to think long and hard before releasing my personal story. But, in speaking to women about it, whether at professional conferences or in support groups around narcissistic abuse, they begged me to do so. For although our individual stories may differ, the pain feels the same. It appears what is missing for nearly anyone who loses herself to a relationship is a healthy and loving connection to the woman she is. This book is my journey toward mine.